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RELIGION AND THE CONCEPT OF PROGRESS

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The closest logical relation subsists between religion and progress because both words express a process of evaluation. Progress is not to be conceived apart from one's own scale of values. Things are progressing or retrogressing according to the point of view of the beholder. But religion also names a more or less subjective fact. It is understood, in the present discussion, to mean the complete, whole-hearted reaction which a human being makes to life and the universe in its most significant aspects, especially the attitude which seeks to *appreciate* rather than to analyze or utilize, and which strives to relate one's self to reality in its final and permanent and inmost meaning, as the individual and his group may conceive it or feel it. Religion is thus seen to be a matter of appreciation in the widest and deepest sense, and is primarily a process of evaluation. So true is this that when people say that such and such a thing, eugenics for example, "ought to be made a matter of religion" it implies a recognition of the fact that religion *is* the organization of the supreme values of life, and simply amounts to saying that the program of eugenics is sufficiently important to find a place among those values.

It is thus apparent that both progress and religion reduce to processes of evaluation, of judgment of worthfulness or its opposite, especially as applied to the most permanent and important aspects of experience. Consequently we need not expect to formulate a concept of progress without finding it necessary to reckon with religious considerations. Since religion is essentially the total reaction of human beings in terms of worth, value, and ultimate significance, it follows

that social philosophy cannot shrink from the attempt to formulate the nature of social progress, even if some eminent sociologists have despaired of the task. That the problem has proven too elusive for sociological methods of thought, at least as developed thus far, is recognized by Professor Ross, when he confesses that

it is hopeless as yet to look for a test of progress that shall be objective and valid for all. Since change is a matter of observation, whereas progress is a matter of judgment involving the application of a subjective standard, those who desire to see sociology a true science are justified in insisting that social dynamics deal with the factors and manner, not of *social progress* merely, but of *social change*.¹

This is perhaps entirely legitimate for sociology, in so far as it aspires to become a quantitative science rather than a philosophy, but its abandonment of the one field makes its success all the more contingent on an early conquest of the other. On the other hand, religious and social philosophy is left to shoulder alone the task of attempting a comprehensive formulation of the goal of our collective striving. For religion does not refuse to put forth at least an earnest effort to infuse some definite meaning into the vague term "progress," with which every man on the street, as well as every scholar in his study or classroom, attempts to conjure, while not one knows what he, himself, much less his interlocutor, means by the word. We have here therefore a yet unfinished task for theology and social philosophy. Not that they, in themselves alone, are capable of such a prodigious task. That is

¹ *Foundations of Sociology* (1912), p. 186. In his latest work, however, Professor Ross takes a somewhat more constructive position, in a chapter which bears the significant title, "Re-Shaping." "What is the use," he asks, "of working out causes and effects, of discovering how things hang together in society, if we are to do nothing with this knowledge? In this time of social self-consciousness and quick and easy dissemination of ideas are we to content ourselves with the tardy and uncertain improvements brought about by blind social evolution? There is, in fact, no alternative but to leave society in self-ignorance or to acquiesce in its reconstruction by the intelligent collective will" (*Principles of Sociology* [1920], p. 545). There is no essential incompatibility between these two statements, but a policy of deliberate and collective reshaping does seem to imply, as a condition precedent, some generally accepted working theory of social progress.

something which will require the combined efforts of many thinkers in many fields.¹ But something is gained when sociology, which has least to be accused of in the way of modesty, definitely relinquishes a piece of territory so vitally connected with social thinking.

Starting, as it did with Comte, upon a distinctly materialistic and positivistic bias, sociology was not greatly spiritualized in the hands of Spencer and Ward—the other two of the first great sociological triumvirate. It should be noted, however, that we use the word “spiritual” here in its narrower and more commonly accepted meaning, for when one considers the wider problem of the relative preponderance of blind material forces on the one hand and those of mind, i.e., the “psychic factors,” on the other, Ward’s noble championship of the latter sets him in the forefront as the transcendent figure of sociological theorizing.

But we are speaking here of the distinctly religious aspect of sociological thinking, and on this point Ward himself perceived the brutal inadequacy of the scientific, or naturalistic, concept of progress, and in his memorable work, *Applied Sociology*, he passed beyond it into a strongly *ethical* conception of social improvement as the true goal of all sociological reasoning. In so doing, after quoting Spencer’s essay on *Progress, Its Law and Cause*, he remarks that Spencer “goes on to show that ‘organic progress consists in a change from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous’ and says that ‘this law of organic progress is the law of all progress. . . .’” “In dealing with that branch (i.e., pure sociology) I have even gone,” continues Ward, “farther than Spencer, and shown that perfection of structure is only a means to the ulterior end of converting the maximum quantity of inorganic into organic matter.”

In the context of this passage, and elsewhere in his writings and university lectures, Ward confessed the somewhat sordid

¹ Cf. Small, *The Meaning of Social Science*, for a masterly presentation of this thought.

nature of such conceptions, and later on in the passage quoted he questions whether the word "evolution" would not, in this instance, better suit the case than the word "progress," reserving for the latter a meaning such as we find expressed in his *Dynamic Sociology* and later works, wherein he clearly affirms that "social progress means more than the mere maintenance of the social organism, just as individual life means more than the bare conservation of the bodily existence. No progress is real that does not constantly show a reduction of the aggregate suffering or an increase of the aggregate enjoyment throughout society," coming finally to the unequivocal assertion that "human progress may . . . be properly defined as that which secures the *increase of human happiness*. Unless it do this, no matter how great a civilization may be, it is not progressive."¹

The hopeless materialism of Mr. Spencer's world-view has been relentlessly exposed by the Scottish philosopher James Ward, in his *Naturalism and Agnosticism*, as well as by a host of lesser thinkers. The conception, worked out by Spencer, of an endless series of evolutions and dissolutions, covering millions of years, whereby all the inconceivable variety and richness of our planetary world is slowly evolved only to be dissolved instantly into world-dust by some stellar catastrophe, and thus endlessly evolving again to repeat the process—all this presents a series of rhythmic risings and fallings which ends always in a chaos as utterly meaningless as that with which it began. At every stage, and in every cranny of the world-wide unfolding which constitutes any such cycle, there is indeed an inexhaustible meaning which it is the very business of science to discover and promulgate in terms of the whole self-environing, self-conditioning process. But the process itself, as a whole, though it consume billions of aeons in its evolution before being shattered into world-mist and star-dust, presents absolutely no meaning satisfying to the moral yearnings of mankind, or capable of being expressed by reason in

¹ *Dynamic Sociology*, II, 174.

terms of permanent worth and value. According to the naturalistic conception of the world, nothing in the universe possesses an abiding value or meaning of any sort whatsoever. With progress at every step, there is total absence of progress in the entire movement as a whole. We have thus the one case in the universe in which the whole is not equal to, but infinitely less than, the sum of the parts!

Nowhere, probably, has this aspect of materialism been more eloquently pictured than in the following passage from Professor James, which is well worth the space, as much for its literary beauty as for its philosophic insight.

Theism and materialism, so different when taken retrospectively, point, when we take them prospectively, to wholly different outlooks of experience. For, according to the theory of mechanical evolution, the laws of redistribution of matter and motion, though they are certainly to thank for all the good hours which our organisms have ever yielded us and for all the ideals which our minds now frame, are yet fatally certain to undo their work again, and to redissolve everything that they have once evolved. You all know the picture of the last state of the universe, which evolutionary science foresees. I cannot state it better than in Mr. Balfour's words: "The energies of our system will decay, the glory of the sun will be dimmed, and the earth, tideless and inert, will no longer tolerate the race which has for a moment disturbed its solitude. Man will go down into the pit, and all his thoughts will perish. The uneasy consciousness which in this obscure corner has for a brief space broken the contented silence of the universe, will be at rest. Matter will know itself no longer. 'Imperishable monuments,' and 'immortal deeds,' death itself, and love stronger than death, will be as if they had not been. Nor will anything that is, be better or worse for all that the labor, genius, devotion, and suffering of man have striven through countless ages to effect."

That is the sting of it, that in the vast driftings of the cosmic weather, though many a jeweled shore appears, and many an enchanted cloud-bank floats away, long lingering ere it be dissolved—even as our world now lingers, for our joy—yet when these transient products are gone, nothing, absolutely nothing remains, to represent those particular qualities, those elements of preciousness which they may have enshrined. Dead and gone are they, gone utterly from the very sphere and room of being. Without an echo; without a memory; without an influence

on aught that may come after, to make it care for similar ideals. This utter final wreck and tragedy is of the essence of scientific materialism as at present understood. The lower and not the higher forces are the eternal forces, or the last surviving forces within the only cycle of evolution which we can definitely see. Mr. Spencer believes this as much as anyone; so why should he argue with us as if we were making silly aesthetic objections to the "grossness" of "matter and motion," the principles of his philosophy, when what really dismays us is the disconsolateness of its ulterior practical results?

No, the true objection to materialism is not positive but negative. It would be farcical at this day to make complaint of it for what it is, for "grossness." Grossness is what grossness does—we now know that. We make complaint of it, on the contrary, for what it is not—not a permanent warrant for our more ideal interests, not a fulfiller of our remotest hopes.

The notion of God, on the other hand, however inferior it may be in clearness to those mathematical notions so current in mechanical philosophy, has at least this superiority over them, that it guarantees an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved. A world with a God in it to say the last word, may indeed burn up or freeze, but we then think of him as still mindful of the old ideals and sure to bring them elsewhere to fruition; so that, where he is, tragedy is only provisional and partial, and shipwreck and dissolution not the absolutely final things. This need of an eternal moral order is one of the deepest needs of our breast. And those poets, like Dante and Wordsworth, who live on the conviction of such an order, owe to that fact the extraordinary tonic and consoling power of their verse.¹

It thus appears that materialism, or naturalism if preferred, really lacks the logical basis for a conception of progress. Religion, on the other hand, is in a way to the manner born, its very breath of life being that evaluating attitude which is so essentially involved in such a process that some sociologists, as shown above, would reject the word. But whether religious philosophers can reduce the *spirit* of their world-view to the terms of a convincing and definite formulation of the legitimate goal of human group strivings is another question. The concept will doubtless need to be consistent with the accepted philosophy of evolution, yet it must escape the fatal tendency

¹ *Pragmatism*, pp. 103-7.

of such thinking to conceive of a process which ends only in destroying its own products—a monstrous proletarian which devours its own offspring! For this is precisely the tragic outcome which is presented to us in the spectacle of humanity toiling painfully from the level of the clod and the beast of the field to a dignity of moral and spiritual aspiration which crowns men and women with “the upward looking and the light”; which builds in the human soul the “music and the dream”; which comes so “trailing clouds of glory” that the soul may walk in “the light that never was on land or sea”—and then suddenly dashes the whole spiritual beauty of life into the débris of an infinite world-wreck without the turning of an eyelash. Under such an outlook no reasoned view of progress is possible except by parts and piecemeal. The evolutionary process evolves beings capable of cherishing thoughts almost divine, and then calmly tramples them into the muck of infinite helplessness and despair. The travail of ages is thus for naught, and nothing can have value except as it fits the moment and the temper of the beholder.

But at this point the protest arises that the yearning for immortality, even though it be conceived in the broadest and most impersonal sense, is a mental state peculiar to certain races and generations of men, or at least to certain individual temperaments, and that it fills no such place of importance in modern times, either logically or psychologically, as assumed in this discussion.

This objection has been partially anticipated, however, by Professor Alexander, in his paper on “The Belief in God and Immortality as Factors in Race Progress.”¹ Recognizing that moral bankruptcy of naturalism which has been sketched above, Professor Alexander points out that, according to such philosophy,

the man of the future is to be one willing to devote himself to the development of an efficient physical life on this earth. He is to do this, aware

¹ In the *Hibbert Journal*, October, 1910, pp. 169 ff.

that in the course of nature all his material works, all his physical achievements, must come to naught. A dead and ruined planet is the ultimate goal of his physical efforts.

Now if such end and such result were to be his sole inspiration, I believe and affirm that his rôle would be an impossible one. . . . The physical life, the life of the great Commune of Man here on earth, must be valued not for its own sake but for the sake of the ideal human character which such a life is to develop.

He next shows that belief in a world-intelligence to which the plan and purpose of each human life is important, and a faith that this world-intelligence, which is really God, will guarantee "a consummation of the life here begun in a world to come," is necessary "in order to satisfy reason." Without asserting "any a priori certitude" as to the existence of such a Being, Professor Alexander sees in such beliefs a positive and valuable equipment for the will to live, and to live with zest and efficiency. In the light of these convictions he is led to affirm that "nature decrees that the man who survives, the race that persists, must believe these things, they are a part of the equipment of the fittest to survive."¹

In this brilliant paper Professor Alexander has urged with great cogency some exceedingly important considerations. From an a priori standpoint his reasoning seems quite convincing, but perhaps a final decision cannot be won apart from an appeal to statistical evidence, which in this case would be hard to get. It may come down in the end to the question whether modern men tend to attach greater or less importance to such beliefs, as compared with earlier generations. While time alone can provide the answer, some argument, if not actual evidence, has already appeared.² By some it is maintained that the desire for immortality is declining among the most progressive races. But the experience of multitudes who have gone through the horrors and sorrows of the recent world-war would indicate quite the contrary, and tends to show that

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 186-87.

² See the article "Apathy about Immortality," in the *Literary Digest*, April 20, 1912, p. 814; also *Belief in God and Immortality*, by James H. Leuba, 1916.

the soul thirst of heartbroken human beings for "the *living* God" is not less fundamental or less imperative than in the days when the Psalmist of Israel longed for God as the hart panted after the water brooks. It is recognized, however, that this will be held to be a natural outcome of the present reversion to a pain economy, and that mankind will regain its spiritual indifference as it regains its fatness and security.

However it may be as to the actual prevalence, under normal social conditions, of such a mental experience, the answer is of considerable logical importance for a theory of social progress. For, as Professor Perry shows in his searching chapter on "The Moral Tests of Progress,"¹ progress is really a quantitative conception, inasmuch as it signifies an *increase* of the good of life, whatever that good may be. Consequently, the question of the value of a sense of God and immortality assumes a position of the utmost importance for our theory of progress. Is such a belief among the real goods of life? Is it not the highest good, the finest product of evolution, when abstracted from all superstitions, fears, and sectarian dogmatism and left to stand in its simple dignity as the most comprehensive, elevated, and mentally chastening value-judgment and worth-reaction of which conscious life is capable? If so, then we are led to conclude that religion has an inextinguishable importance, an indispensable function, in human existence. So full of meaning is it, upon this hypothesis, that the naturalistic philosophy really pictures to us an immeasurably vast process of evolution, which works up from the primeval chaos, through countless ages, to the creation of a being whose exalted conception of duty and destiny constitutes, even for his own happiness no less than for his moral discipline, the supreme good of life, and yet this very process requires for its completion the uttermost shatterment of that supreme good, along with all the lesser goods of life. And this, say the prophets of materialism, is *progress*!

¹ See *The Moral Economy*, 1909.

The legitimate conclusion from these reflections seems to be that the definition of progress in adequate and comprehensive terms is logically impossible apart from that appreciating, evaluating reaction of the whole man, including his emotional nature, toward life and the world, which is the soul of religion. Consequently "progress," for irreligious thinkers, must of necessity remain a term which, in spite of its constant use, can have no definite content. And it is quite evident, moreover, that the constant use of "evolution," as signifying "progress," by scientific thinkers is entirely without logical warrant or justification. The truth is that no one can affirm that the human species, the social order, or the world as a whole will continue to develop toward higher levels, rather than lower, without an exercise of *faith* in some ongoing aspect of the universe which guarantees the permanency of the values of existence. But such a belief is essentially religious, so that we are led to the conclusion that apart from the religious attitude as herein defined no such thing as progress can be logically conceived or even consistently believed in.

Professor Alexander's conviction, that religious faith is an important factor in fitness for survival in the struggles of life, is very clearly shared by the authors of a recent textbook on sociology.¹ It is there forcibly argued that religion has actually so figured in the past. In fact, its very prevalence among men is taken as an evidence of its value in furthering group welfare. "As an instrument armed with which the natural powers of men may prove equal to a need or crisis it has survived."² Religion, according to this argument, has been preserved, and not eliminated, through social selection, because optimism is a more successful frame of mind than pessimism, and it is his trust in the help of higher powers and his belief in a heavenly hope even when every earthly good seemed lost, which has made of man the unconquerable battler against every wind of circumstance. But that attitude of

¹ Blackmar and Gillin, *Outlines of Sociology*, 1915.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 310.

mind is in its very essence religious, and therefore it is that religion, whether true, in the metaphysical sense, or merely a beneficent illusion, "has proved to be a working philosophy of life." It is a postulate which works out constructively and successfully in experience, and is consequently, in the view of the present writer, of precisely the same validity as the theory of electrons or any other working hypothesis of science.

In this connection it may be permissible to notice the fact that many people hail the zeal for social service manifested by many non-religious persons as evidence that religion is not necessary as a motive for such a work and life. This may be true, but it must not be forgotten that many, if not all, of such servants of humanity derived their moral enthusiasm and impetus from the godly homes or schools in which they were reared. It remains to be seen how long it will take for the moral and spiritual power of the generation just passing away to become a spent force. Furthermore, probably all truly ministering spirits who report themselves as holding to no religion, really cherish a cheerful faith in Evolution, Progress, or some other capitalized word which guarantees a fruitful outcome for their unselfish labors; a confident optimism which renders one essentially religious in the meaning of the term as used in this essay.

The notable statistical studies of Professor Leuba concerning the actual prevalence of the belief in God and immortality seem to indicate that such conceptions are declining in modern times among college students and scientific men. His data, resulting from the extensive use of questionnaires, seem further to indicate that, so far as *psychologists are concerned*, these beliefs are found to be most diminished among the *more eminent* men in that field.

This study offers a significant contribution which cannot be ignored, and in so far as the facts are really established by correct and adequate statistical methods it would be futile to quarrel with them. Indeed, they simply tend to establish

the existence of a movement in modern thought which seems more or less plain even to casual observation. But while *facts*, so far as established, must be faced rather than argued with, it would be a misfortune to adopt in the same way every logical *implication* involved. Such an unwarranted inference in this instance would be to conclude that, inasmuch as the "more eminent" psychologists, or other scientists for that matter, indicated less interest in God and immortality than their lesser colleagues, these beliefs are thereby and to that extent invalidated from the point of view of their philosophical integrity or sociological value.

The fact that "more eminent" psychologists discount more fully the belief in God and immortality may simply register the fact that eminence in psychology demands more and more a temperament and intellect which find their natural medium in quantitative measurement of physical phenomena rather than in the philosophical interpretation and evaluation of the less tangible and more elusive, yet even more significant, aspects of human experience. In such a case, the conclusion should not be that the more eminent (and presumably more able and authoritative) men of psychological science have least use for the religious conceptions in question, but, conversely, that men whose natural temper and training gives them least interest and ability in the methods of thought indispensable to philosophy are by that very fact those who attain, other things being equal, eminence in psychology, allowance being made for notable exceptions.

This hypothesis is borne out by the well-recognized fact that psychology has steadily drifted away from its original mother, which is philosophy and metaphysics, and has moved toward physics, biology, and physiology.¹ An examination of the subjects developed in leading psychological monographs and articles for the last ten years will impress on any observer

¹ Cf. the presidential address of Professor J. M. Sterrett, in the *Psychological Review*, XVI (1909), 85 ff.

the astonishing preponderance of physical measurements, especially as applied to minute studies of the more strictly individualistic and materialistic aspects of the various sensations, perceptions, and higher intellectual processes. In the vast, rich field of the emotional life, the field of the sentiments, and the supremely significant but difficult realm of group experience, psychology, in the strictly orthodox sense, had, until recently, done very little. Yet here is precisely where the great problems of religion lie. Our conclusion then is that even while accepting the facts established by Professor Leuba's research, we shall indeed be quite unphilosophical, and consequently superficial, to accept any indifference toward religion on the part of scientific men as valid evidence against its social value or even its absolute truth.

The significant suggestion from the situation seems to be that the supreme task of the present century will have to be the construction of a spiritual view of life, a task for which physical science, including most of current psychology, is entirely disqualified, but which will have to be the work of a truly *scientific* philosophy and metaphysics. The course of evolution has maneuvered mankind into an exceedingly dark blind alley in these later days. The brutes have no knowledge of death and hence no fear of it, or need of a remedy. Less sophisticated men are aware of their impending doom, but religious faith in God and immortality robs the grave of its sting. The thoroughly modernized man, if the inference from Professor Leuba's studies is to hold, contemplates the extinction of all his works without remedy—the one redeeming feature being that he seems, according to the figures, to be inclined not to care. In this situation, nothing but a rehabilitation of religious faith, or the widespread promulgation of a philosophy of indifference and resignation, can meet the prospect before the world as the darkness of scientific enlightenment continues to gather. Whether our refuge will be in faith or in resignation depends upon whether

Professor Leuba's indifferent man of scientific eminence represents the type of the future humanity, or whether the latter is more nearly exemplified in Professor William James, the greatest psychologist of them all, yet a profound philosopher, whose works on the whole tended, as he himself remarked, to loosen up the joints of this old cast-iron universe, and leave a little room for personal faith. After all, perhaps a scientist, in the security of his laboratory and the lustiness of his health, is a poor spokesman for humanity as it actually exists. Moreover, the testimony of the world-war corroborates our most fundamental premise, that religion is the most profound reaction an individual or a group can make toward life and the universe, especially in its unknown and more critical aspects. The fact that God is not found at the bottom of a test tube or at the end of a logical syllogism does not diminish the supreme necessity of religion for the ongoing daily life of the world. And this would seem to be true whether we think of life in terms of concrete activity or try to conceive of it abstractly as a process to which there attaches a comprehensive meaning which is partly expressed in the term "social progress."